



## KAREN A. YARBROUGH

RECORDER OF DEEDS / REGISTRAR OF TORRENS TITLES  
COOK COUNTY, ILLINOIS

October 21, 2013

The Honorable Toni Preckwinkle, President  
The Honorable John P. Daly, Chairman, Finance Committee  
Cook County Board of Commissioners

Dear Members of the Finance Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to update you on our good stewardship of public dollars in this budget cycle, some of our challenges and plans for the future.

Much thanks to all of you for allowing me to realign our FY 2013 budget during the first 30 days of my administration to accommodate my priorities for the office. In essence, this budget we operated under for all practical purposes is my budget.

Our vision for the Recorder of Deeds Office, can be summed up in three words: **Accuracy, Efficiency and Advocacy.**

- As keepers of the public land record, our foremost statutory duty is to ensure that what is presented to us is accurately recorded and indexed in a way that improves and supports the housing market.
- As a government office responsible to taxpayers, it is also important that we do so as efficiently as possible, using only the resources needed to get the job done.
- As you probably know, I actively advocated taxpayer needs before the General Assembly in Springfield, and was able to pass 3 laws that will allow us to assist victims of recording fraud and punish fraudsters.

Upon taking office, it was clear that the first step was to do a broad assessment of an office that was in great need of a hands-on administrator.

Top staff was directed to coordinate in-depth analyses of our operations, including our workflows and space-utilization, hardware and software needs, and our financial controls. These efforts were needed to help prioritize our requests for capital improvements and system upgrades, improvements that will allow us to meet our goals of Accuracy, Efficiency and Advocacy. I'm grateful to County staff, especially BOT and Facilities Management, for helping us get closer to our goals.

In addition to some easy fixes like enhanced lighting in public areas and organizing workspaces to convey an attention to detail that people expect from our office, we have been working to provide services with fewer employees through attrition. We even increased our revenue by discovering a cashing error that existed prior to our arrival that was preventing us from collecting the full amount of fees that are required.

I want you to know that this is an Administration willing and able to look high and low for ways to improve the taxpayers' office. We are proud to be one of the largest revenue generators for the County, with one of the smallest staffs.

### **OUR BUDGET REQUEST**

Our FY 2014 Budget request is less than the current budget. Additionally, we are experiencing an increase in revenue. To be specific, our FY 2013 revenue projection was \$33 million, yet we anticipate collecting around \$40 million by year end. Trends in the housing market suggest an ongoing recovery, indicating even more revenue for next year.

This 2014 Budget Request reflects our desire to be a part of a Countywide effort to improve finances.

To ensure that our actions match our words, consider these 5 items:

1. Our Corporate Operating Budget request is slightly less than we asked for last year.
2. In response to President Preckwinkle's request: 20% of our vacant positions were cut.
3. We advocated receiving a \$1.3 million settlement from a "robo-signing" lawsuit won by Attorney General Madigan, money that will be used to help assess and repair the damage to the public record.
4. We turned over \$1.1 million from our Torrens Fund to the County, with the hope that we can use it down the road to relocate our Torrens records.
5. Though we may have been able to make the case for a truly flat budget, coming in below "flat" shows that we are proceeding with integrity, facts, and respect for the process, and for the tough task you have before you.

### **OUR PLANS FOR NEXT YEAR**

Now that we've talked about what we've done this year and how our Budget Request reflects our values, I want to update you on some of our bigger plans for 2014.

- **Revenue:** We plan to seek a change in state law to allow land conveyance documents to be electronically recorded, (otherwise known as E-Recording) which will be a revenue boost to the County and efficiency for our customers.
- **System Upgrade:** Our recording software system, which we call our "core application," has not been updated in over 10 years. As a result of many hodgepodge modifications over the years, the database is essentially unusable as far as offering us metrics we can track to better promote revenue-generating products. The time is now to undertake this costly, but necessary, modernization.
- **Digitization:** As each year passes, more public records are at risk of deteriorating to the point of non-usability. We plan to undertake a push to digitize our records (such as microfilm and Photostat) from 1970 back to 1871, a move that will not only protect the public record, but allow us to free up physical space in our Chicago Location.
- **Workflow:** Based on our Workflow Audit, we will be aggressively implementing changes in the way we perform our daily operations. This will eliminate redundancies, unneeded paper and supplies, and free up staff to focus on our core operations and bringing the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest Recorder's Office into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **CHALLENGES**

Life would be perfect if there were no challenges; but I look at our challenges as temporary setbacks and opportunities to do a public good the right way.

- Our greatest asset at CCRD is our Human Resources. We're lucky to have four generations of institutional knowledge in our workforce. Some lack technology skills needed to do 21st Century work therefore, a Training Room was instituted replete with staff, computers and valuable programs to enhance skill sets. This enhancement has been well-received.
- The Concourse level of the 118 N Clark Building where extremely fragile documents are stored has a very serious flooding problem. Flooding is taking place in areas that are occupied by our staff and are open to the public. We are working with Facilities and Capital Planning to seek solutions in this area.
- As you all are aware, I inherited a Federal Monitor in light of previous Unlawful Political Discrimination related issues at CCRD. Much time has been spent in training staff, monitoring actions etc. in the past several months to try to change a culture that has flourished for decades. My staff and I are committed to attaining substantial compliance as soon as humanly possible. At our very first meeting with the States Attorney and Monitor, we were advised that to reach substantial compliance we would have to hire a part-time Director of Compliance; later we were told this hire was expected to be a full-time position. This impacted our budget. We are now in the process of interviewing and identifying a Director of Compliance, and should have one in place in the next few weeks. This is needed for substantial compliance.
- In that same area, we were also advised that an Employment Plan was in the works and ready to be implemented back in December of 2012. However, after many, many hurdles, it was finally completed in August, 2013. This is also needed for substantial compliance.

### **CONCLUSION**

Again, our mission is Accuracy, Efficiency and Advocacy, and this Budget Request is our blueprint. This request represents an honest effort to be a part of a larger, Countywide effort of fiscal responsibility.

I invite you all to visit our new website, CookRecorder.com: sign up for our Property Fraud Alert Program, and those of you who are Veterans, record your DD214's for safe-keeping. I invite each of you to personally visit me at my Office so that I can show you how we are putting our mission into action.

Sincerely,



Karen A Yarbrough  
Cook County Recorder of Deeds